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# THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL\*

BY ARNOLD BENNETT

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## I

Nor long since the American novel had only a past; that past was Nathaniel Hawthorne. But recently it has acquired a future, a gem of brilliant water whose rays have dazzled the eyes of England. The old order changes, giving place to a condition of affairs more in harmony with the principles of the Shipping Combine. The old order is symbolized by a few dozen neat and even splendid villas dotted over the face of England—villas of English novelists, built and supported largely out of American royalties. The new order will be symbolized in America by literary palazzos on the Hudson and in the Adirondacks, and in England by inexpensive rows of semi-detached cottages in the remoter suburbs of London. The pendulum will swing slowly, but it will swing. A few years ago the English author dictated terms to the American publisher as a conqueror dictates terms to the defeated host. That was because the lettered population of the United States firmly believed that its native soil was not favorable to the growth of novelists, while the rich loam of Great Britain produced them in abundance and excellence. "So-and-So a good novelist?" exclaimed the lettered population of the United States. "Impossible! He was born in K'n-tucky!" And, of course, England did not contradict; to contradict would have been against human nature and against the axioms of good business. Consequently, the advertisements of English publishers contained scarcely any American names save those of Mr. Henry James and Mr. William Dean Howells, and one or two more, and the advertisements of American publishers teemed with the gospel of

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English genius in fiction. Consider the advertisements of to-day, and you will perceive that the magic slipper is on the other foot.

From a fairly intimate acquaintance with English literary life, I can say that the English novelist has taken his rebuff (I would not call it defeat) cheerfully, even generously. Though it is a fact that the incomes of some English authors have been diminished by from one to three thousand pounds sterling per annum, I have heard little serious complaint. English authors admit that they have been batting on a hard wicket for a prodigious period, and that their innings are over for a time. They accept the situation as one accepts an earthquake or a trade-wind. This is wise of them. That they should in the hour of fiery trial show an intelligent and appreciative interest in the fire that burns them is an astonishing proof of generosity on their part, possibly unequaled in the curiosities of literature. It is, however, no exaggeration to say that at the present moment England is genuinely interested in the phenomenon of American fiction. "Everything happens," said the sagacious Talleyrand—and he was never more sagacious than when he said it—and we recognize that everything may shortly happen in American fiction; in other words, that the Tolstoy of the future is probably now playing baseball, and not cricket. This intelligent interest in American fiction stands quite apart from the notorious and incredible crazes of the last year or two, perhaps because it is intelligent. (Still, craze for craze, America may hold her head up; *David Harum* is infinitely nearer to literature than *The Master Christian*.) English writers indubitably display an interest of despair in the fiscal rewards of the heroes of American literary crazes, but their artistic concern is with men and women who are not stars of the first magnitude in the heaven of American public opinion. Writers of the generation of Mr. Henry James they profoundly esteem. And this reminds me of a *mot* of Mr. Barry Pain's in apologizing for the absence of Mr. James at a banquet. "Mr. James," said the author of *The One Before*, "has his own special public all over the world. He can proudly say that he is never read by a stupid man—except, of course, reviewers." But no new departure is expected from the generation of Mr. Henry James. Whereas the future is big with possible developments of the various schools of fiction represented by writers like Mr. James Lane Allen, Mr. Frank

Norris, Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, Mrs. Edith Wharton, Mr. Hamlin Garland, and Mr. Theodore Dreiser. These are the American names that interest those people in England who can distinguish between a book and a beefsteak. The two American books which last year created the most genuine sensation among the aforesaid circle were Mr. Norris's *The Octopus* and Mr. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Of the former I shall have more to say presently. Touching the latter, the first exclamation of many people will be: Who is Mr. Theodore Dreiser? Which proves that lookers-on see most of the game. For myself I cannot answer the question as to the identity of Mr. Theodore Dreiser. But the consensus of educated English opinion about his book was too marked to go unnoticed. I am told that this fine and somber work was ignored in America until England began to discuss it, and that even then its reception in the country of its birth was on the zero side of tepid. Yet I am by no means the only English reviewer who has not been more impressed by the work of a new author for years. *Sister Carrie* was forwarded to me for review by the editor of a London literary organ when I was on a holiday, and my attitude toward it was decidedly inimical before I began it. Nevertheless I sent in my review with a note, "This thing is eye-opening good." The editor replied: "I had read it before I sent it to you, and I also thought it eye-opening good. But I did not want to bias your opinion by telling you of this." I trust this personal anecdote may be excused, since it illustrates what I may call the "new" English attitude toward American fiction. *Sister Carrie* was one of a special series of American novels issued by an English publisher noted for the fine quality of his fiction. On the binding of that series an American eagle spread its pinions against a background consisting of the Capitol and the risen sun. The eagle has typified much in the past; here it typified an artistic conquest—it indicated that the American novel was aloft.

## II

And there are divers reasons for the uprising of the American novel, some minor and one major. I will deal with the minor reasons first.

Americans read vastly more than Englishmen. None but a nation of convinced, inveterate, and incurable readers could support the sixty-four page Sunday editions of the daily

papers; a less studious race would sink under that massive weight of letterpress, illustrations, and advertisements. But in addition to being a nation of newspaper readers, the United States is a nation of book-buyers. It is notorious that an Englishman never buys a book; any bookseller in the Strand will assure you of that elemental fact. The greatest book-buyers in the world are the French; after them come the Scotch—Edinburgh is certainly the most literary city in Europe except Paris; and next comes the United States. The population of the United States is less than double that of the United Kingdom, yet the circulation of the most popular books in the United States is three, four, and five times that of the most popular books in Britain. If a book in England achieves a sale of fifty thousand copies, the publisher gets excited; if it reaches a hundred thousand, he takes a full page in the *Athenæum* to announce the miracle; if it exceeds a hundred and twenty thousand, he builds himself a lordly pleasure-house and keeps nine gardeners. But in the United States nothing under a quarter of a million is likely to quicken the pulse, and sales of a hundred thousand are as common as corners in foodstuffs. Whatever may be said by the superior against the literary taste of America, it is incontrovertible that Americans do buy books, thus fulfilling the first condition precedent, in these commercial times, to a worthy national literature. American booksellers are in far better case than their English contemporaries, and even Mr. Charles A. Burckhardt, the New York bookseller who at the second annual convention of the American Bookselling Association complained that he had never heard of a bookseller who could afford to ride in his own automobile, was obliged to admit that the state of the profession was so rapidly improving that before many years every bookseller might possess his car. When bibliophiles ride in autocars, then the chances of a great novel coming along are indeed rosy. It is strange, by the way, that a bookseller, even the most pessimistic, should lament the "enormous output of books," as did Mr. Harry Gregory at the same convention. Mr. Gregory said that, because of this output, "not one book in ten could hope to be remembered one year after its publication." A most excellent thing, too! And was it not always thus? Was there ever a period in the whole history of modern publishing when the average book survived for more than a year? Because Thackeray, Dickens, George

Eliot, and the Brontës wrote forty years ago, people are apt to imagine that the entire literature of that era consisted of immortal works. It is scarcely so. The proportion of feeble books to strong was probably exactly the same then as now. The life of the average book has certainly been somewhat abbreviated of late years; but that is due to the fact that, while money has decreased in worth, the worth of time has been enhanced. Six months of the present are worth twelve months of forty years ago; time is only a metaphysical conception, and in reality the exchange value of a month is no more immutable than that of a five-dollar bill. But my point is that the transitoriness of the average book improves the prospects of the author who is ingenious enough to write a book above the average.

Again, the American is not only more interested in imaginative literature than the Englishman, he is more quickly interested and he is more variously interested. As French is the most artistic and the most uniformly brilliant of all modern literatures, so an intelligent curiosity about French literature is a phenomenon upon which any foreign nation that evinces it has the right to congratulate itself. It is well known that most of the large enterprises in translation which have marked the last decade have had their inception in America. At the present time a twenty-four-volume edition of the works of Théophile Gautier, at three and a half dollars the volume, is being issued, not in London, but in New York. I encountered the other day an English version of the famous sonnets, *Les Trophées*, of José-Maria de Hérédia. It was not an epoch-making effort of translation, but it was a quite creditable essay in the absolutely impossible. The book was published in San Francisco, and my copy was of the third edition. Such things could not occur in London; at least they do not. The profits on the translation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* were tenfold in America what they were in England. Similar facts might easily be multiplied, but it is not necessary to go further to show that the bookish interests of the United States are free from that "grooviness" which stifles the artistic growth of a national literature.

Another factor which must ultimately "make for righteousness," though the myopic may not think so, is to be seen in the superior shrewdness, enterprise, and daring which characterize American publishing. The methods, and espe-

cially the advertisements, of American publishers cause smiles in Paternoster Row. But I, for one, would not smile at them. The business of the publisher is, after all, to sell; if he sells he succeeds. How he sells cannot affect the quality of his wares; the author must always attend to that. The American publisher's amazing and unswerving determination to sell cannot fail to have a beneficial effect on American fiction. Look back and you will see that the glories of English and American literature have been published by firms who set out to sell and did sell. Such firms naturally fascinate the best authors, and they extract the best that is in those authors. The first thing that genius wants is money, and money he will have. Scott wanted it, Thackeray wanted it, Balzac badly wanted it; they all wanted it. And, therefore, nothing is more likely to foster genius than a set of commercial conditions nicely calculated to give genius its extreme *quid pro quo* in cash. If the success of *Waverley* had not meant money, does any one suppose that we should have had *The Heart of Midlothian*? The causative connection between money and imaginative energy is one of the most intimate and direct known to social science, but people mention it as little as possible. Lastly, in this regard, I should say that the comparatively large number of publishing centers in the United States must assist the development of literature. In Great Britain there are but two centers, London and Edinburgh (perhaps one ought to put it Edinburgh and London); Oxford and Cambridge certainly publish, but only in the Academic or Pickwickian sense, and Glasgow is not sufficiently active to count. In America most cities, even Portland, seem to publish; and this decentralization should decidedly tend to increase the opportunities of budding talent.

### III

But the great argument in favor of the future of the American novel, an argument by the side of which the foregoing contentions are as nothing, lies in the strenuousness, the variety, and the essential romance of American life. A strenuous national life always leads to fine art. The great French romantic movement of the nineteenth century had its roots in the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. It may be more or less true that America, by the ardor of its will-to-live, is gradually becoming a mass of overwrought nerves,

a vast stomach for the reception of patent medicines; but it is infallibly certain that this intensity of competition, this interplay of warring activities, this havoc of operations in Wall Street, these monstrous concatenations of dollars, will lead to enterprises equally prodigious, fierce, and astounding in the region of imaginative art. The material is far too good to be wasted. By a kind of natural economic law the epoch which produces the raw material for art will surely produce the artists capable of using that raw material. In material, as well as in creative energy, the American author must decidedly have the start of the rest of the world. And the importance of material cannot well be overestimated. A considerable portion of Balzac's pre-eminence in the novel of actuality is due to the extraordinary wealth of material that lay to his hand. From 1800 to 1830 nothing happened in France that was not picturesque, disturbing, deracinating, or positively seismic. Financial speculation was at its wildest; the rich became poor and the poor became rich; nobles dizzily oscillated between exile and grandeur; thrones fell and were re-established; luxury increased; and beneath all, supporting all, the old agricultural life of the departments ran on almost undisturbed. What would not Balzac have done with Pittsburg, the sixteen-hour express between New York and Chicago, Wall Street, Mr. Pierpont Morgan, and the wheat-growing States? He would have said: "This country is simply steeped in romance; it lies about in heaps. Give me a pen, quick, for Heaven's sake!" And we should have had a second *Comédie Humaine* compared to which the first was a story by Jane Austen for quietude. Not every one, of course, can perceive the romantic quality of American life. Perhaps most Americans are too close to it. The millionaire who retires to a sleepless couch knowing that on the morrow he will be broken; the impoverished housewife who must give her children dry bread because a beef trust will not disclose its account-books—these and such cannot be expected to see the romantic fun. But none the less the artist will see it; and none the less is the romantic fun fine and glorious because suffering is the the very warp and woof of it. You may say that the same state of things prevails in other countries. It does, but in no other country is there the vivifying, resistless energy, the crude force, the marvelous violence of contrast and diversity of scene that delight the soul of the imaginative writer in the United States. It



is a mere truism to say that while the rest of the world only exists, the United States lives.

All the minute depicting of the thousand forms of local life in America, which is now so prominent a feature of American fiction, is a mere preliminary. It is excellent, admirable, necessary, but it is a preliminary. It is the fiction of States, not of the United States. The great novels of the future will spring from the action and reaction of place on place and activity on activity. They will be big, like American landscapes and fortunes; they must be. They will comprehend everything in one embrace, because only in such a conspectus can the full romantic beauty of each detail be perceived. They will pretty certainly be of two kinds—the two kinds that have always persisted and always will persist—the purely romantic and the romantic-sociological, the Dumas kind and the Balzac kind. Of the former two clever prototypical specimens that have impressed me are *The Short Line War* and *Calumet "K,"* both written in collaboration by Messrs. S. Merwin and H. K. Webster. *Calumet "K,"* especially disengages the sheer romance that lies concealed, for instance, in grain elevators, contract jobs, and wheat manipulations. It has faults, but it has the genuine romantic spirit, and it is as modern in material as wireless telegraphy. Of the latter, the Balzac kind, Mr. Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (first of a projected trilogy of novels about wheat) is a notable herald. Indeed, it stands alone. It is almost the only novel yet produced that deals with the activities of modern American life in a manner at once large, serious, and romantic. It is like nothing else, and it succeeds where M. Zola has again and again failed. There can be small doubt that the great novels of the future will run on the lines of *The Octopus*, though one may venture to prophesy that they will contain a little less sentimentality. *The Octopus* is almost fatally vitiated by the sentimentality of the close. And let me finish by asserting that sentimentality is the rock which the ship of American fiction has to steer clear of. The American novelist of the future will do well to bear in mind that life unadulterated is the best possible material for art.

ARNOLD BENNETT.